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# The Duty of a Society to Educate its Members in the Principles of Co-operation.

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## A PAPER

*(Prepared by request of the United Board Educational Committee)*

TO BE READ AT MEMBERS' MEETINGS  
OR SOCIAL GATHERINGS.

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## THE DUTY OF A SOCIETY TO EDUCATE ITS MEMBERS IN THE PRINCIPLES OF CO-OPERATION.

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PROFESSOR STUART, in the inaugural address which he delivered to the co-operators at the annual Congress held in Gloucester, in 1879, said, "Education is desirable for all mankind, but it is the life's necessity for co-operators." A brief and concise sentence this, but the words are nevertheless well chosen, full of meaning, and demand the thoughtful consideration of every individual connected with the co-operative movement; and, as if the Professor knew the apathy that exists with a large number of the members of co-operative societies with regard to devoting either time or effort in promoting educational work, was fully sensible of the tendency to regard co-operation as a means of purchasing articles of food at a cheaper rate than in the ordinary system of trading, or a method of accumulating dividends, and to treat with indifference the more important work of education, he supplemented his statement with a further injunction by saying, "This cannot be too often repeated." No apology, therefore, need be made for using his words here.

The advantages of education, and the power which an intelligent man possesses over an unintelligent, are, without doubt, apparent to all thoughtful persons; but there does not appear to be any good reasons why any particular classes or sections of the community should be so highly educated as to monopolise the power which follows the possession of knowledge, while on the other hand other

classes and sections pass through life as comparatively uneducated men and women. We can look around amongst the busy toilers, and we see here and there an intelligent man, with all his faculties active and awake—a man attaining and living up to his birthright, exercising an influence over his fellow-men, but compared with such a man the majority of our working men and women are lacking in intelligence, and their aims and aspirations are far too low. The reason for this is not difficult to seek. A large proportion of young men, and young women too, seem to think that their education was completed when they passed for the last time out of the precincts of the school, and their text books were committed to some out-of-the-way corner not to be looked into again. They seem to forget that our whole life is a school, and that we only cease to learn when we cease to live; and that what has been taught in the tender and impressionable years of youth is only of an elementary character—a foundation on which to raise a higher standard, the broader and more extended education of a lifetime. In the same way that we teach children the characters of the alphabet, that they may afterwards apply this knowledge in the formation of words, and then teach them the meaning of words that they may properly apply them in the construction of sentences, so should the education given in youth be applied in after years to our technical training, to the development of business habits, and to our social relations and obligations to each other.

Whilst the advantages derived from a general education are admitted without dispute, and encouragement is freely given to the various institutions that have for their object the instruction of men, making them more useful as citizens, the phase of educational work which more immediately concerns co-operators and co-operative societies is educating the members in the principles of co-operation.

The necessity for this kind of teaching must be evident to those who have mixed freely with the ordinary members of co-operative societies, and have been regular attendants at the periodical business meetings of societies. How many there are who care so little for the welfare of the particular society of which they are members, that they will not put themselves to any inconvenience to attend the quarterly meetings. How many there are who never look into the balance sheets except to see the one item of "Profit for the quarter," and whose only interest is contained in the question, "What is the divi?" Of those who do attend the quarterly meetings only a small proportion have a clear conception and a well-defined knowledge of the principles on which the co-operative union is based, and the objects which are sought to be attained.

In a paper written with the object of inducing societies to recognise the duty of educating its members in the principles of co-operation, it will not be out of place to refer to the three principles of association which were adopted at a co-operative congress held in 1852, and which have been acknowledged generally by the societies represented in the Co-operative Union, viz:—

1. That human society is a body consisting of many members, not a collection of warring atoms.
2. That true workmen must be fellow-workers, and not rivals.
3. That a principle of justice, not of selfishness, must govern exchanges.

These principles have been well observed by the Pioneers of the movement, by the enthusiastic men who have been recognised as the men of light and leading in co-operation, by the men who, with tongue and pen, after patient toil and earnest advocacy, have succeeded in organising the scattered co-operative societies and uniting them in a National Co-

operative Union, having for its objects, as defined in its rules and orders, "To promote the practice of truthfulness, justice, and economy in production and exchange—1. By the abolition of all false dealing. 2. By conciliating the conflicting interests of the capitalist, the worker, and the purchaser, through an equitable division among them of the fund commonly known as profit. 3. By preventing the waste of labour now caused by ill-regulated competition."

These, then, are the principles that it is desirable to teach the members of co-operative societies to inculcate into their minds; the principles that must be engrafted into the very lives of the rank and file of the different companies that make up the army of co-operators. It is these principles that must be set up as the standards by which to gauge the soundness and genuineness of co-operation, the principles with which the practices of societies and the individual members must be compared.

The objects of the Union it is also necessary to keep constantly before the members of societies. They should be to co-operators what the directing posts on a wayside road are to the traveller—an index pointing to the goal which is desired to be reached.

Judge Hughes, whose services on behalf of co-operation can never be over-estimated, and whose name is a household word amongst co-operators, in an interesting lecture delivered in Manchester in 1878, said, "It is worth while to be constantly reminding ourselves of the principles to which we are pledged, as we all know how strong the temptation is to use our organisations for the mere acquisition of wealth, after the example of the competitive world, to follow after the idols of false cheapness and large profits, without a thought of how the pursuit affects any one except ourselves."

The education of co-operators is a duty incumbent on all societies alike, whether they be the small societies



located in country villages, having but a general store, and whose membership consists of only a few score of persons, or whether they be the larger societies situated in the busy towns of commerce and manufacture, whose membership can be counted by thousands, and, in some instances, by ten thousand. In the small societies how slow is their growth, how almost imperceptible their development, what a chequered history do they present, and what struggles have many of them had to pass through. Many of these societies will not encourage the idea of association with other co-operative organisations; they see not the advantages of union, and are content to live in isolation; they are sceptical with regard to the advantages to be derived from the Co-operative Union or trading with the Wholesale Society. This indifference, it is to be feared, is mainly due to the fact that the vital principles of co-operation do not form a very striking feature in the ideal which such societies have created. In the formation of societies it may be observed how careful the members are to select the most intelligent amongst themselves to fill the principal offices in the society, and in some districts difficulties are experienced in finding a sufficient number of educated men to constitute the committee, the business being left in the hands, in some instances, of one or two individuals, such as the parish clerk, or the village schoolmaster, who become the centre of the circle around whom the society and its business revolve. Although in the election of such individuals to office, a tribute is paid to the abilities and power which education gives, how necessary does it become that the individuals who possess so much power and influence, and in whose keeping is the weal or woe of the society, should understand the principles of co-operation, and have them at heart. If the societies of this character could only be well advised with the view to

their future development and consolidation, they would devote a portion of the profits of their early years in affording facilities to their officers and leaders of obtaining a knowledge of the objects and aims of co-operators, and the best and most direct means of realising them; of acquainting themselves with the real meaning of the principles of co-operation, and the advantage that would accrue to society by carrying them into practice.

If it were possible to analyse very closely the causes which have led to the failure of many societies that have been strangled in their infancy, it would probably be found that it was a want of intelligence, the neglect of educational efforts, and the lack of knowledge of co-operative principles that contributed in no small degree to their collapse.

Passing from the smaller societies to the larger ones, that have extensive interests, and have added department to department until nearly all the domestic wants of their members can be met at the stores, then the necessity for educational work and effort becomes more urgent. Where there are but one or two departments, and the business is of a simple character, the officers and committee may manage to rub through a difficulty by keeping well in the rut, or on the beaten paths which others have made; but when a variety of interests are being developed, when new fields of enterprise have to be opened up, and the more complex phase of co-operative production is entered into, it is to the men who have a definite knowledge of the aims sought—men of clear heads, keen intellect, and honest hearts—that we must look for a successful accomplishment of the work; and it is only reasonable to say that it is the duty of co-operative societies to give the facilities and encourage the means of making the men whose services they require for the development of their projects and schemes.



A difficult problem which often presents itself for solution in large societies is the rapid growth of the capital; its accumulation at a rate considerably in advance of the business requirements, until at last the question of what to do with the surplus capital becomes a trouble. Substantial buildings are provided for the convenience of members in transacting business; shops are well stocked with goods; bakeries and steam flour mills are erected; dairy farming is adopted; cottages are provided for co-operators to live in; and other enterprises are entered into. But still the question remains, What is to be done with the growing capital? and the fact has to be admitted that members and officers are not sufficiently educated to utilise it profitably for the advantage of co-operators. How much of the accumulated capital of co-operative societies is to-day in the hands of bankers, handed over to them to utilise? True, these investments bear a low rate of interest, which is certainly better than no interest at all, and is more profitably employed than if locked up in a safe. But what does it really mean? It means that we have taken the capital of co-operators and lent it to men more capable and intelligent than ourselves, who will employ it in speculations that may possibly be competing with our co-operative societies; and by this means the banking companies are making for themselves, out of the savings of working men, an interest that will enrich their shareholders, while co-operators are content to receive such remuneration as the bankers think fit to award.

The words of Professor Stuart on this point are worth repeating, and indicate very strongly the necessity for educational efforts. He said: "There is, indeed, a danger to co-operation from its own success; it is not in the accumulation of funds, it lies in the increase of your capital more rapidly than in the increase of your education. If the mass of your members are not sufficiently instructed in

economic science, in the facts of commerce, in the state of this and of other countries in the history of trade, in general knowledge, and in particular knowledge of what you aim at, and how you seek it—if the mass of your members are not sufficiently instructed in these things, there arises a real danger to the co-operative movement. Your numbers become a hindrance, and your possessions become a peril, and your productive endeavours will continue to be the failure which they too often hitherto have been. The movement cannot repose on the good sense of the few, its success will depend on the good sense of the masses of your people, who, if they be ignorant, can in no way judge of the merit of this or that adventure, of this or that commercial step. When you seek to embark your funds in productive enterprise, that enterprise will come to nought; it will be badly managed, it will be a failure unless the masses of your people are well instructed in all that commerce and industry demand. Co-operators are founding a scheme, a principle of action, which they aim at making widespread, and such must be founded on the true elements of success, and these elements include knowledge. The pioneers of co-operation have to create not only capital, but they have to create knowledge among the individual members, and the enterprise can be successful only so far as these go hand in hand."

A question must now be considered as to the means to be adopted to teach the members the principles of co-operation. Much useful information can be imparted and gained at conferences—they are the nursery grounds for thought, and co-operative societies should be urged, during the winter months especially, to hold conferences of their members for the purpose of hearing papers read, to be followed by discussions on the various points brought out. A difficulty has, in some places, been experienced in obtaining writers for papers, but there are so many papers now in print which

can be obtained from the Central Board, that no series of conferences need be at a loss as to what to do for a subject for discussion. The conferences should be made as attractive as possible by lively discussion, and should be the means of drawing together the men of experience in the movement.

Classes should be introduced for a systematic study of a course of subjects in co-operation: these classes will be best adapted to the young men who have begun to manifest an interest in what co-operation is doing, and are aspiring some day to do their share of work in the administration of the society to which they are attached. These means of teaching the principles of co-operation will be an excellent training school for young men, so that when they have to take up the work as the co-operators of advanced years pass away they will not have to begin where their predecessors began, but they will be able to start on their official life with a full knowledge of the principles and aims of the movement, and will be competent to carry the work forward much better with the groundwork which they have obtained.

The distribution of co-operative literature, in the form of tracts or leaflets, should be encouraged. Leaflets, if printed on one side, with some short and pithy extracts from speeches that are made or addresses that are given from time to time, might be utilised by societies in printing on the reverse side some attractive facts relating to the particular society requiring them, which would probably engage the attention of some who are not disposed to read the longer articles on co-operation.

In setting out to do educational work it must not be expected that the whole mass of the members of societies can be moved at the outset. A few of the most thoughtful and earnest members must be brought together in the first place, and the spirit of enthusiasm must be kindled in this knot of



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co-operators, and with patience and perseverance the little leaven will in time leaven the whole body; as when a stone is cast into the water a small circle is first made which gradually extends, so will the influence of a few enthusiastic co-operators be felt throughout the society in whose interests they think, speak, and act.

What will be the advantages derived from this educational work? We shall doubtless see an improvement in the conduct of business; we shall see less of that spirit of jealousy which so often hinders working men in the realisation of their objects and aims; we shall hear less of personal and offensive criticisms that grate harshly on the feelings of those against whom they are used; we shall find men more tolerant of other men's opinions, however much they may disagree with their own; and, amongst other things, they will have learned to agree to differ.

When these principles of co-operation are understood, we shall not find the manufactures of Co-operative Productive Associations struggling for a market; we shall not see the workers in these associations living between hope and fear; but we may hope to see co-operators living up to their convictions, careful that their practices are in accord with their professions, each member working not for self alone, but for the greatest good to the greatest number.

